

Personal Verite Documentary

version 1.2b

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The male fantasies of **sex, lies, and videotape**...being able to document the personal, domestic space...the male instrument invading the woman's domain. elaborate positive and negative aspects of this.

About 1960 a new style, mode, and movement of documentary filmmaking developed in the industrial capitalist nations, particularly France, Canada, and the U.S. , called direct cinema or cinema verite (from the French, *cinéma vérité*, a translation of the Russian term, *kino pravda* (film truth), put forward by Dziga Vertov, the Soviet documentarist in the 1920s).¹ Verite filmmaking involved a distinct change in production technology. At first verite enabled documentary makers to work on location with synchronous sound in a two person team using portable equipment. Verite was extended by the development of high speed black and white film which encouraged shooting indoors and at night using available light. Wide aperture zoom lenses allowed for a characteristic hand held camera style that gave the cinematographer the opportunity to move in and around the given space without being too intrusive and to move across with a pan as well as through the space with a zoom in on an individual.

¹Some people find it useful to distinguish between direct cinema and cinema verite; my purpose here is not to subdivide styles but to mark a common starting point for a distinct tendency in contemporary documentary.

Certain obvious conventions develop with this technology and its choices, for example the zoom in on an event followed by a change in focus to clarify the image. Such a device carries connotations of immediacy: the camera was not prefocused, and the camera point of view carries a certain subjectivity, a sense of the cameraperson's work. Projecting a kind of handheld "feel" the mobile camera dominates the events taking place before it. A narrator is used only to set things up. The visual track dominates, in strong contrast to many previous event documentaries. Verite decisively challenged the previous documentary tradition of voice dominating image in which visuals become mere illustrations for the scripted voice in an authoritative (and sometimes authoritarian) and usually patriarchal voice. In verite, the documentary possibility is emphasized over the interpretative one, the unexpected and idiosyncratic add texture to the familiar and repeated, the event dominates. Narration begins with sequential arrangement, rather than the expository logic of formal interviews or public statement. The intriguing myth of spontaneity, of the candid camera, of the decisive moment, predominates. Combined with the inevitable voyeurism of documentary (here it is, see it now...), the result was a powerful momentum toward compelling viewing.

Every new media style carries its own mythology, and for verite this was the "fly on the wall" myth that the camera presence was not really noticed and did not change the transpiring events. There is a relative

truth in this claim; compared with previous synch sound documentary, which typically involved a producer, director, camera person, sound recordist, and assistants to carry lights, tripod, and additional equipment, verite worked well with a mobile cameraperson and sound recordist who could operate independently of each other in the same space. Using available light, it was less intrusive and could move with the flow of events rather than staging them for the camera.

But in any absolute sense, the claim for non-intervention was absurd. Even if, in the heat of the moment, the people present forgot the events were being recorded--as often seems the case in news footage of disasters, or moments of great anguish or happiness--it's certainly the case that most people most of the time are aware of the camera's presence and do change their behavior. Furthermore, the actual editing of the footage and recorded sound obviously imposes selection and interpretation through emphasis, juxtaposition, commentary, and so forth. Actors, celebrities, politicians, salespeople, teachers, bureaucrats, human service workers, and many of the marginal and stigmatized members of society enact public roles with the camera present or not. But at the time that verite hit the scene, it was far less obvious to people than it is today that they were part of an expanding commercial media culture which, with the particular growth of television in the 50s in North America, made everyone part of the moving image spectacle that was reshaping national politics and personal perception.

Yet verite was not totally unfamiliar to the U.S. audience. On the level of image taking, verite could be compared with the development of **Life** magazine photojournalism, particularly in the photo essay format shot with 35mm cameras using available light and recording everyday life or extraordinary drama. The classic **Life** photo essay on the single young woman in New York City reproduced in ... is a good example. Ideology of form.

The typical verite documentary was shot on location, giving a developmental view of a newsworthy conflict, such as **Primary**, which showed the 1960 spring primary competition in Wisconsin between John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey. Or it could be a behind the scenes view of a celebrity, such as the film of Bob Dylan on tour in England, **Don't Look Back**. Or it could focus on interesting but "ordinary" people, such as **David**, a close study of a drug addict recovering in a Synanon program, and **Salesman**, depicting several days in the life of travelling door to door Bible salesmen. An economically important subgenre was the rockumentary, giving an on location and behind the scenes view of a concert, with **Woodstock** as the supreme example. As verite developed over time, it tended to become increasingly self conscious, a change highly marked in **Gimme Shelter**, the film of the Rolling Stones Altamont concert, which begins with band members in the film editing room going over footage of Hell's Angels beating an audience member to death. The sensational documentation apparently could not "stand alone" but

needed the verbal presence of the Stones to comment on the image, which is really an ethical discourse laid on the reportage to make it more palatable, less disturbing, more commercial.

Verite becomes, very quickly, an interesting index of its times, a measure of the general attitudes and ideologies of the liberals who made the films.² Its topics, its observational prejudices, and its circulation--largely in the art house and nontheatrical market, and later on Public Broadcasting tv--all reveal a bias to social justice as a given, the professional and petty bourgeoisie as an audience, and institutional reform as a solution.

The importance of the distinct cameraperson and editor's style: people who are really hot keep the edge on. Later Wiseman as an example of style failure and flaccidity.

And in many ways the verite form reveals a particularly masculine approach to documentary investigation, a set of assumptions about

²Documenting this assertion would take some time, but I think it an accurate generalization. By education, class position, family background, general support for social and political reform, choice of topics, and approach to them, as well as overt and covert politics, the main verite filmmakers tend to fall in the liberal Democrat to left radical spectrum. It can be rather easily shown that **Primary**, for example, favors Kennedy over Humphrey.

realism and the role of the filmmaker which came under attack in the formulation of a radical counter cinema in the 1970s.³

towards personal verite

By the early 70s, the technical development of verite had reached a new stage. Reel-to-reel portable video produced a low definition image, but remarkably inexpensive shooting for high shooting ratio work, opening new opportunities as in tvtv. Sound Super 8 seemed a promising development for others. In 16mm film a substantial infrastructure for color film processing was developed in urban areas because of broadcast television's use of newsfilm. Increasing miniturization and portability lead to one person synch sound rigs while high speed color film broadened the resources. These were not unmixed blessings. The color film exhibited burnout in highlights and loss of detail in shadow because color film had a small exposure latitude. Filmmakers also had to face the problem of working with mixed light sources and their effect on color stock such as the generally garish and ghastly look of flourscent light. Furthermore, with one person rigs the sound quality varies quite a bit in many works, with sound sometimes lost. Another characteristic of the later phase is the use of an extreme wide angle lens, Rather than the characteristic zooming of earlier verite, the wide angle lens encourages

³The classic theoretical statement is Eileen McGarry, "Documentary Realism and Women's Cinema," *Women & Film*, 2:7 (1975).

moving the camera and camera person, working close to the subjects filmed, and gives a broader view of space and environment. The result is often a stronger subjective feeling of presence in viewing the image. The point of view is always us viewers, the camera eye is our eye. This shooting style also shapes an editing style without cutaways. Whereas the original verite filmmakers felt the need to insert reaction shots to speakers, or details of the environment and events, the later approach was increasingly aimed at respecting the spatial and temporal integrity of the event. The dead time and "in between" become signifying aspects of the presentation. From initially being a style favoring the talented editor assembling a meaningful whole, the verite approach came to favor and display virtuoso camera work.

This stage of verite documentary also had its ideology, which is summed up in the myth of the "noble pursuit of truth at any cost," especially when turned to personal subjects. Increasingly the form left itself open to exploitation by creepy or arrogant and unethical filmmakers, especially when dealing with personal subjects. discuss Ed Pincus?

stance

Verite always poses a basic problem: what is the stance of the maker to the subject matter? While this is an issue for all documentary, with this style, particularly in its later evolution, we often ask if we are looking at something frankly or sarcastically. In other words, is this being presented

with a "neutral" or "balanced" perspective, or is there a built-in irony or ambiguity in the work? Or is the irony, if noted, in the role of receiver? much noted in Wiseman, **Salesman**, etc. pushed to the limit in Clarke's **Portrait of Jason**.

A good example is provided by Tom Palazzolo's **Ricky and Rocky** which depicts a pre-wedding party, a backyard bridal shower, among lower middle class or working class white ethnics in Chicago. When I show this film where I teach, at expensive, private, and elite Northwestern University, to students who typically come from upper middle class suburban families, the students almost always laugh at the people, at their different lifestyle and behavior. At its best the verite approach shows us things that are significant, but usually ignored in our media culture. Palazzolo's **Labor Day East Chicago** shows ordinary working class people in a steel mill town having a holiday, with the extreme sex role separation characteristic of the environment: the young men box, the young women parade in a beauty contest. The film gives a sense of the possibilities these people face, the context in which they live and hope, particularly in a concluding section at night hanging out with beer drinking young adults who have few options for their future. Elaborate with examples, frame enlargements?

But the same style, from the same filmmaker, can produce at its worst a demeaning cynicism in the point of view. **I Was a Contestant in Mother's Wet T Shirt Contest**, the women are airhead bimbos, the guys in the bar

are just drunk animals. The film contains no reflection on the power differential of men and women in our culture: that the women are doing this to make some money while the men are attending it for entertainment and voyeuristic gratification. The film seems to indicate that the filmmaker is being ironic and sarcastic to everyone shown, while hiding behind the camera. By using the myth of empiricism--the idea that truth is on the surface and only on the surface, existing without context, without structure, without history-- the filmmaker inadvertently reveals an ideology. By not showing any personal moral, ethical, or political involvement or relationship, by not being himself vulnerable, Palazzolo seems to tolerate or endorse the status quo. In his films on clashes between neo-Nazi demonstrators and Black civil rights protestors on the battlefield of a public park between Black and white ethnic neighborhoods in Chicago, he seems to damn both sides equally, unwilling or unable to see any substantive difference between the two groups. And this impression from the films is consistently reinforced by the declared intentions of the filmmaker who celebrates his own ironic distance from what he films, a distance that becomes sadly pathetic when he films subjects he presumably respects, such as his elderly grandmother in **Nona**, which reveals more about the inability of the maker to empathetically understand his subject than it does about the elderly woman.

The problematic with Palazzolo: he doesn't have traditional verite distance (the sense of being there, but as a fly on the wall (examples

from Primary) or as a silent participant observer, we sense he is present and through (silent) methods framing our understanding, through selection expressing his own opinions. Yet he hesitates. And remains within the strict confines of empiricism.

Another development in the early 70s, contributed to changes in personal documentary. The immensely successful and influential tv documentary, **An American Family**, appeared. While directed with a traditional tv location style, the resulting work gave a close look at personal environment of an upper middle class family. It gave a "warts and all" view, and documented its own intervention into the lives of the family, and the resulting revelations and tensions, the parent's divorce and the separation of family members. Clearly, the presence of the camera was instrumental in forcing or helping a process of awareness and change. Personal documentary, in the sense of documentary about personal life, was shown on national television as an instigator of family change, a provocation for change, perhaps even a substitute for therapy in a troubled environment. In a media environment in which game shows allow Mr. Smith and Ms. Doe to become celebrities, self conscious images, part of the postmod moment, the ante is raised for everyone. You could be on television, being saved by Jesus, cheering on your team, demonstrating for a cause, observing a disaster, witnessing a crime, purchasing jewelry on a home shopping network, exhibiting a symptom-- physical or social.

With everyone part of the game, but unequally so, the verite motive takes on a different nature. Given the postmod environment, people begin to see themselves as potential contributors to the media. Their behavior, their enactment, is considerably more conscious, more theatrical, more organized.

Mark Rance's film about his mother's departure from home for career training in New York, **Mom**, is a good example of male cinema verite filmmaking, its problems and potentials.

setting--Glencoe, upper middle class (clue to filmmaker as well as family), class bias of this kind of personal documentary. Perhaps consumer video will give more access to lower middle class, working class, and poor families.

lose sound at times, burnout of highlights, xcu of faces with w/a lens produces gross distortion, inclusion of end of camera roll with flare, sound runs on as image runs out, etc. shows the artifice.

use of real time, Dad chases moth, presentation of the insignificant, the texture of the everyday, or symptom of something else, symbolic of his personality? We're not sure, can be read either way.

How we kill time, all the waiting, in-between times, etc. The familiar, also the unguarded moment, the mistake, the miscue, etc.

The familiar, dropping someone off at the airport

The intrusion: Mom getting made up in bathroom, hair in curlers, etc.

There's a certain amount of anger toward the Mother here. Next sequence, he wakes her up an hour and a half late for a very important event (obvious hostility).

Spoil the ending. What we get in turn, the "politics of the family," the explosion, her anger:

"You haven't been a woman. You don't know what it's like. I'll tell you. It's shit. That's what it's like."

Mom

But then she takes it back. Just a stressed out moment? Or the truth, but the role of mom is to reconcile. Remember--she also saw **An American Family**. She (like everyone else in our culture) knows how to act in front of the camera, knows its there, knows how to take risks with it in a calculated way.

the c-v form calls on the spectator to actually analyze and or evaluate the character shown, the people represented. We are asked to make a moral judgement (example of projection in reaction to Wiseman's films).

issues of ethnographic filmmaking (summary from Claudia's article)

Bill Stamets, Chicago Politics: Theater of Power (S8mm to video)
extended discussion of his coverage of Chicago politics in the 80s

In Chicago, local politics is the favorite year round spectator sport and journalism feeds the fans all the latest. For about a decade, filmmaker Bill Stamets has followed "the pack" of reporters, tv technicians, photographers, PR hacks and others who cover City Hall and the endless campaign appearances, press conferences, parades, ethnic group banquets, and hype events. Stamets films the events from the edge--literally and figuratively. While tv news crews move about with \$80,000 video cameras, Stamets shoots with a super 8mm camera that cost him a few hundred. While others shoot the official proceedings, Stamets covers the before and after, the unguarded moment, the aside, and the unexpected. As someone who has no immediate goal for his footage or deadline to meet, the filmmaker remains something of an outsider--a skeptical, even reluctant, participant-observer in the midst of the media whirlpool.

Powerful Fun (1986, 52 minutes) presents three year's worth of media events in a condensed way. Here is Governor Jim Thompson handshaking his way through the center of a parade, an octopus of glad handing, shot by Stamets who is following the manic campaigner. The handheld camera with a wide angle of view shows the marchers' surprise when the governor comes charging through their procession with hands flying and a

hearty "Hiya, big guy!" The image tells us more about the magnificent insincerity of politics than a hundred editorials ever could.

Stamets calls this kind of film a "newsreel" and compares it to the now-defunct form with its prejudicial narration, concentration on authority figures, predilection for cheap shots, and coverage of the most public face of the news world. But the traditional newsreel always accepted the media event as a self-contained reality. By showing us the backside, the moments of waiting, the flaws and goofs as well, Stamets reverses priorities and mocks the pretense while showing the texture.

The texture of the everyday forms the main interest of his recent films about his family. **Boy with a Microphone** (1985, 11 min.) shows his young nephew's view of rural life including the outdoors toybox and the pigs. The child asks the family dog, "Why are you chained up?" and offers the mike for an answer. As the kid and Stamets wander about together, we get a nice sense of innocent exploration butting against dutiful authority, as when Stamets' brother tries to get the little boy to learn a Latin genus and species name for a bird, something far beyond the kid's ability.

In a similar vein, a loving and comic portrait of his father and stepmother, **Dad and Mona** (1986, 26 min.), shows the foibles and familiarities of middle class family life. Dad, the engineer, gets a toy steam engine kit and happily assembles it and plays favorite songs with more feeling than skill on the piano while Mom endlessly tries to stage manage daily life.

The pleasure here is one of recognition--not of course that we know these people, but we know very well that most of the time most of life is just like that.

Over the years Stamets has made a number of powerful and important documentaries about Chicago politics. **Novo Dextro** shows the confrontation of Gay Pride paraders with Nazi counter-protestors. **Mayor Speaks to Group** presents Harold Washington speaking in a dignified and formal way to a white audience and then, a few hours later, telling it like it is in a wonderfully rich and humorous address to a Black gathering.

Periodically Stamets reworks and re-edits his material, so it never seems quite the same from show to show, and his friends and enthusiasts always pack into his tiny apartment for his screenings of work-in-progress.

Powerful Fun will probably never be seen in exactly the same form as it was shown at Chicago Filmmakers. But the memory of the moments captured remains because of their uniqueness, vitality, and insight into the life of the city. Street corner preachers, Vietnam vets, Democratic machine ward heelers, blond teens with "White Power" t-shirts, and Black teens cursing out Klan demonstrators: Stamets creates a portrait of Second City that is mostly warts and all. He's a visual version of Nelson Algren, and that's a powerful compliment.

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revised 8/28/18
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move this elsewhere---

Lie Back and Enjoy It JoAnn Elam (Chicago)

Short, comic. Visuals, elaborately optically printed found footage with a few titles, and soundtrack dialogue raising issues of the filmmaker/subject relationship when cast in a personal mode, male/female power. A good example of how feminist filmmakers have critiqued the taken for granted assumptions of personal documentary and male filmmaking, particularly the power and ethical issues involved.

move this too?

Keltie's Beard Sara Halprin (aka Barbara Martineau)

Another dimension of personal filmmaking. Here draws on the feminist film doc'y tradition of a woman telling her own story in her own words. Originally this was a question of "positive image" and giving "voice" to the silenced. Here it is at a much later and more sophisticated stage (technically it's deceptively simple). Keltie's story shows the difficulty and pain of herself trying to find her own identity and the fact that in so doing she deeply offends and threatens women in her family. This is not reconciled in the film, though the film ends happily.

Demon Lover Diary Joel Demott (same environment as Roger and Me)

three things:

a woman in a man's world; all the reference points are male (ex. Mrs. Jackson who is a moral reference point in the film). She tends to be interested rather than appalled, though toward the end she increasingly foreshadows the ending. This approach not picked up by explicitly feminist filmmakers until **Rate It X**, (Weiner and ?) where men damn themselves out of their own mouths (Sarmiento, *A Man When He IS A Man*).

use of her own voice over in a very personal way, not just factual, but also her own feelings

depiction of white working class environment. Later fully developed in **Seventeen**.

Concluding discussion, how the maker places him/her self in relation to the subject matter, the people being filmed/taped...how that is modified by different considerations: technology available, maker's sensibility (ideology plus training), political relation to events (public or domestic). What we get out of it. Contrast with ego trip docy (Roger and Me).

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revised 8/28/18
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